News From the Wyoming Department of Health

Tuesday, April 4, 2006

Department of Health Begins 2006 West Nile Virus Testing

CHEYENNE - The Wyoming Department of Health has started horse and dead bird testing and surveillance for the 2006 West Nile virus (WNV) season.

West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne disease that can cause a potentially serious illness in humans. Mosquitoes spread this virus after they feed on infected birds and then bite people, other birds and animals.

"We remain committed to providing surveillance and testing for WNV to help reduce the impact of the disease in Wyoming," said Terry Creekmore, West Nile virus surveillance coordinator.

Kelly Weidenbach, surveillance epidemiologist for the Wyoming Department of Health, said 12 human WNV infections were identified in Wyoming in 2005 with two fatal cases. The number of cases last year was much lower than during the 2003 WNV epidemic with 393 reported human WNV infections.

"Although the occurrence of human WNV infections in Wyoming seems to be decreasing compared to 2003, some of this variability could be due to effective local mosquito control programs, weather and other factors," Weidenbach said. "West Nile virus in Wyoming is here to stay."

Bird and horse testing provides a surveillance system for WNV activity because birds and horses typically become infected with WNV earlier in the season than humans. WNV-positive birds and horses are good indicators for WNV activity in a particular area.

The Wyoming Department of Health will solicit dead birds until the end of October through the West Nile virus hotline: 1-877-WYO-BITE. The department prefers to test crows, magpies, jays and ravens; however, other birds may be tested. Those finding raptors such as hawks, owls or eagles should contact the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to arrange for carcass transport and testing.

People who find a dead bird on their property should call the West Nile Virus hotline for instructions rather than sending it to state or local health agencies. Callers will be asked to provide the following information: name, phone number, bird species, number of dead birds, address where bird was found and approximate date of death. If the bird(s) are suitable for testing, callers will be advised on how to handle and submit the carcass.

Results are usually available within one week. Persons will be notified ONLY if the bird is positive. Not every bird that is submitted will be tested. Reasons to not test a bird include:

the bird is too decomposed, excessive birds have already been submitted from that area or the bird is the wrong species.

People with questions about horse testing should contact Dr. Todd Cornish at the Wyoming State Veterinary Lab at (307) 742-6638.

More information about West Nile virus can be found on the Wyoming Department of Health's "Bad Skeeter" website: www.badskeeter.org.

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